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AUTHOR Dinham, Sarah M.; Blake, Veronica M.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined influences upon experienced teachers' course planning. Seven teachers were each intensively interviewed four times about their planning for courses they had never before taught; the interviews took place before, after, and twice during the semester of the "new" course in question. Findings were classified into three categories of influences drawn both from others' research and from the interviews: the disciplinary, the educational, and the organizational contexts for course planning. Four interpretations resulted: the reaffirmed primacy of disciplinary considerations in course planning; the educational and organizational bases for change; the overriding importance of the course's organizational context; and the cyclic nature of course planning. The Contextual Filters model developed at the National Center for Research To Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning is described and expanded. Contains 21 references. (Author/GLR)

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Influences on

University Teachers' Course Planning

Sarah M. Dinham, Ph.D.
Veronica M. Blake, M.Ed.

Center for Research on Undergraduate Education
Education Building Box 513
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721
(602) 621-1700

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Abstract

College teachers' thinking and planning has only recently begun to supplement investigators' longstanding interest in instructional processes. This study examined influences upon experienced teachers' course planning. Seven teachers were each intensively interviewed four times about their planning for courses they had never before taught; data were analyzed using methods explicated by Spradley and Strauss. Findings were classified into three categories of influences drawn both from others' research and from the interviews: the disciplinary, the educational, and the organizational contexts for course planning. Four interpretations resulted: the reaffirmed primacy of disciplinary considerations in course planning, the educational and organizational bases for change, the overriding importance of the course's organizational context, and the cyclic nature of course planning. Expansions upon the Stark, et al. Contextual Filters model were offered.

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Introduction

Although research on postsecondary teaching has historically concentrated on instruction and the events surrounding it (such as instructional strategies or teaching evaluation), recently a few investigators have turned their attention to how college teachers think. As with research on the teaching of young students, this newer research on postsecondary teaching "assumes that what teachers do is affected by what they think. This approach ... is concerned with teachers' judgment, decision making, and planning. The study of the thinking processes of teachers ... is expected to lead to understandings of the uniquely human processes that guide and determine their behavior (Clark & Yinger, 1979, p. 231). Donald (1986, 1987) began this process in postsecondary education by examining university faculty members' conceptions of their subject disciplines and those conceptions' influence on their teaching, and Lowther, Stark and colleagues (1988, 1990) have investigated patterns in college teachers' course planning for introductory courses. These two research programs have demonstrated the complexity of the course planning process, and have led other researchers to the brink of vastly expanded possibilities for research on teachers' thinking and planning for their university teaching.

The present study, part of a larger investigation of university teaching, sought to extend these research efforts by more minutely examining the influences upon experienced university teachers' course planning. Because it is evident that traditional input-out models of course planning offer woefully insufficient explanations for the complexities of teachers' thinking about their teaching (Zahorik, 1975), because simplistic prescriptions for "systematic" course planning fail to account for the "complex and fluid design process" in which teachers design "practical courses of action in complex situations" (Clark and Yinger, 1987), and because traditional models fail to suggest how to understand and improve teachers' judgment and decision making about their teaching, this study sought a clearer picture of the factors influencing university teachers' course planning.

Theoretical Framework

The landmark work of Lowther, Stark and colleagues (1988, 1990) at NCRIPTAL provided the most important foundation for this study. Defining course planning broadly and acknowledging its intellectual complexity, they studied the course planning influences and activities in several studies. First, they interviewed 89 teachers responsible for introductory courses in a variety of fields at a variety of institutional types, interviewed students from those courses, and examined the course material for the courses in question. From this initial study emerged the planning for their larger, major study, whose 1990 report outlines their course planning model and its development. Their latest work extends not only their earlier conceptions but those of others by treating such diverse subjects as disciplinary influences on conceptions of teaching, curricular issues, course design, perceptions of students about their courses, and variations in planning strategies with varying patterns of course planning activities.

Although our present work rests on the Stark, Lowther et al. conceptions, it differs in several important ways. In contrast with the NCRIPTAL research, which aggregated data from many teachers in introductory courses studied at only one time, the investigation of which this study was a part focused minutely on a few university teachers' thinking as the teachers planned and reconceptualized their planning throughout the courses that ranged from introductory to advanced levels. Moreover, we sought to examine not only which influences might be most salient for college

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teachers, but how these influences work in the thinking of teachers planning a course. The study exemplifies exactly the argument offered by methodologists who advocate coupling large-scale quantitative studies with smaller-scale, more intensive qualitative investigation of the complex processes unearthed in the larger-scale research.

The Larger Investigation

The larger investigation of which this study is a part was designed to explore several aspects of college teachers' cognition. In addition to investigating influences on course planning -- the focus of this paper -- we also studied teacher knowledge of students, the design and management of academic tasks (Doyle 1986a, 1986b) as representations of curriculum, a concept of teaching called "dilemma management (Lampert, M., 1985), and teachers' improvisation (Yinger, 1987).

In this investigation, conducted at an AAU public Research I university, our sample design held constant teaching experience, teaching quality and prior experience with the course in question, varied fields across liberal arts and professions, and varied course levels from freshman to doctoral -- although all courses could (like the courses in the NCRIPTAL studies) be termed "introductory" from the perspective of the students. We used campus-wide contacts to obtain nominations of experienced professors with good teaching reputations who were teaching for the first time a regularly offered or newly created course. Seven teachers, representing six disciplines and teaching courses ranging from freshman to doctoral level, agreed to participate: (1) Andrea, an experienced professor in a College of Nursing, who was teaching the revised graduate level education process course, the first semester of a two-semester block; (2) Diana, a seasoned member of the humanities faculty, who was teaching the first semester of a revised three-semester sophomore level humanities block, a course planned by committee; (3) Kathryn and (4) Linda, who collaborated in planning and teaching a women's history doctoral seminar on race and gender; (5) Matthew, a veteran in the School of Engineering and principal lecturer for a team-taught introductory engineering course planned by committee; (6) Miguel, a young teacher who planned and taught a doctoral level course in business management; and (7) Valerie, a young teacher, who planned and taught a newly created laboratory course to accompany a sophomore-level nonmajor lecture course in wildlife biology.[1] Illustration 1 provides an overview of the courses' characteristics.

Participants were interviewed four times: before, after, and twice during the semester of the "new" course in question. This schedule was planned to unearth important data at times when the original planning was intact and when information about modifications would be most naturally apparent. The first interview occurred before the first class so that the initial course planning was still clear in the teachers' minds and had not changed as a result of actual class sessions. The second interview occurred about four to five weeks into the semester to discuss how the initial planning had worked out, how it had been altered, and why. The third interview took place about six to seven weeks later in order to investigate further planning and changes, as well as to determine how the earlier changes had worked. The fourth and final interview was conducted at the end of the semester to discuss the teachers' thoughts about how they would teach the course again.

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[1]As it happened, the sample consisted of teachers responsible for two freshman and one sophomore courses, and three at the graduate level. When the next phase of the study is undertaken next year, we will concentrate on courses at the junior and senior levels.

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The core of each interview was a set of three to five open-ended questions derived from the study's theoretical framework. The questions rested heavily upon the Lowther and Stark findings about course planning together with Dinham's (1989) discoveries about influences on teachers' thinking and planning for "apprentice" teaching. In addition, all but the first interview drew from decisions, problems, and answers revealed in earlier interviews. Sorting tasks designed to generate information about specific aspects of course planning were also used in each interview; these sorting tasks presented statements describing alternative conceptions of teaching and required the teachers to weight each of the statements to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statements.

Because the data became available serially, as Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 234) point out can (and often should) occur, the analysis was "essentially an investigative process, not unlike detective work" (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 37). The interview transcripts were analyzed using an overall strategy outlined by Strauss (1987) employing the domain analysis and theme analysis techniques explicated by Spradley (1979). In these procedures we first used a surface domain analysis (Spradley, 1979, p. 133) of the many influences coded from the raw data, followed by simple taxonomic analyses (p. 147); following these taxonomies' construction a theme analysis (p. 189) was attempted, to determine the connections among domains and to express a general semantic relationship among those domains. The sorting tasks yielded percentage weights summarized by descriptive statistics. Finally, these several sources of findings were compared with the model proposed by Stark et al. (1990, p. 139).

The larger investigation has yielded findings about not only the influences on teachers' course planning but also such topics as the role in college teaching of academic tasks as the operationalization of curriculum (Blake and Dinham, 1990, 1991), teachers' conceptions of their disciplinary field and its manifestation in course content, the nature and process of change throughout a course's progress, and "dilemma management." Today's discussion concentrates, however, on our study of course planning influences.

Methods for Studying Influences on Course Planning

Through the four interviews with each teacher, we obtained data about the influences on course planning from several sources. In their first interview, before the course began, the teachers were asked two questions designed to elicit information on the influences upon their planning:

> How do you go about the planning of a course you've not taught before? [Probes: thinking, decision making]
>
> What influences your planning for this course? [Probes: goals, thoughts, purpose, steps, timeline, activities, personal style]

The teachers' direct responses to these two questions provided the first source of data on course planning influences. A second, indirect, source was information about influences on their planning that emerged throughout the responses to other questions, such as "What are your assignments in this class?" and "What changes have you made in the course?"

From our teachers' responses to the first interview's direct questions about planning influences, and from the work of Stark, et al. (1990, p. 139), we gathered twelve categories of influences on course planning. These twelve were printed on cards and presented in the third interview; the teachers

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sorted and then weighted the influences (using point allocations so the points allocated to the 12 cards totalled 100) to indicate the twelve influences' relative contribution in their course planning. The twelve categories of influences used in this card sort were:

How you see the discipline
Your background as a scholar
Your background as a teacher
Your ideas about the purpose of education
Your ideas about the purpose of this course

College/program/department goals
Department policy/history
The University's general education requirements
Other related courses
Student characteristics
Expert opinion on what such courses should include
Resources available for use in the course

After completing the card sort, the teachers explained their point allocations to the interviewer; these narratives formed the fourth source of data about influences on course planning. In summary, then, the four data sources for studying influences on course planning were:

1. Responses to the two direct, open-ended questions about influences on course planning
2. Comments on course planning influences indirectly emerging in answers to other questions
3. Points allocated to each of 12 categories of influences on course planning
4. Discussions of the point allocations given to the 12 categories

Of these four sources of data, three rested upon analysis of the interview narratives. For narrative data, agreement among data coders is essential. We established coding agreement by the following procedure. We each independently coded all interviews for three of our teachers (Diana, Miguel, and Matthew) and then we compared our coding of the interviews passage by passage. For the 154 passages that at least one of us had designated as evidencing (an) influence(s) on the teacher's planning, we recorded whether we agreed or disagreed on that code for that passage. We agreed outright on 61% of the passages. For another 30% of the passages we found ourselves using related codes for slightly different aspects of course planning: in these instances one of us might code a passage as addressing direct influences on planning the course while the other used for the same passage the code for influences on the course planning process. Because the study's purpose was to probe both overall influences (for example source of course content) and influences on the planning process (for example deciding to consult others' opinions), we classified these 30% as congruent codings as well, for a total intercoder agreement of 91%. For 9% of the passages we did not agree on whether the passage evidenced influences on course planning.

Findings

The major procedural discovery of this study was that the sorting task concerning influences on

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teachers' planning acted as a stimulus for immensely interesting discourse on the teachers' planning, but yielded generally uninformative weights taken alone, without interpretation. Individual category weights did not mirror the importance divulged in the narrative. For example "How you see the discipline" was rated uniformly low (mean 4.6 points of 100 possible) but the interviews showed (as the NCRIPTAL work and Donald's research have shown) that course planning is strongly influenced by disciplinary conceptions. The subjects' weights for the twelve categories of influences on course planning are shown in Illustration 2. In contrast to these weights, the teachers' comments about these twelve categories of influences, and their comments elsewhere in the interviews, yielded rich evidence about the vast and complex influences on their course planning.

The substantive findings of the study were achieved through analyses of course planning influences as contexts for planning -- the very conception used by Stark et al. in developing and explicating their Contextual Filters model (1990). These contexts, as vividly described by our experienced teachers, are reviewed below.

The Disciplinary Context

While "how you see the discipline" might have been given low weights in the sorting task, disciplinary influences permeated the teachers' discussions from the most conceptual to the most specific. In the broadest sense, as the course manifests aspects of a scholarly discipline, its planning draws from the field, as in the case of this graduate history seminar:

> We expose them to a lot of good scholarship ... so they will be able to see that doing theoretical work doesn't entail a blueprint -- that there are various ways one can do it. ... There are various disciplines that contribute -- we have literary criticism and anthropology and a variety of other things in our readings. And economics. So I think that, too, gives them a broad exposure; I think it's important that they understand that theory isn't just straight-jacket.

The specifics of course planning can evolve from this broad sense of the field, as the same teachers explained:

> We generally wanted to start with theory and then [identify] specific topics and scholarship in [each of those] specific topics.

In contrast, other teachers offered other, perhaps less esoteric, illustrations for how their sense of their discipline influenced their planning. For example in the freshman wildlife biology laboratory:

> Well, this whole class is "preaching to the field." The fact that you ... take people who know nothing about wildlife and try to turn them into ... intelligent consumers, informed consumers.

The same teacher illustrated another view of her field in explaining her writing assignments:

> Communication is a vital part of any science activity -- business -- anything you care to name. If you can't communicate, you're not going to be effective. And written communication is on the wane, I grant you, but it's still a fairly important part of life in this culture. And many of [the students] are very bad at it. I don't think you do them any favors "All right, you can't write, I hate grading the damn stuff, so I'm just going to do multiple choice, true-false, short

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answer."

Several teachers used disciplinary metaphors in discussing their course planning. The most vivid came from the engineer:

> The way we've been joking about it, the course itself is a design project, just like we've been giving to the kids! We have some idea of what we want to do, we have some goals stated ... we're going to come up with our best guess and ... see if that works. If it doesn't quite work right, then you go back and try something else and you begin by varying things until you find a system that sort of meets your needs.
>
> [Interviewer: when we talked before, you talked about looking at the course from the perspective of a design project. Do you still feel that is a good way to look at it?] Sure. I think we're in the design process right now. When you're developing a design you have a basic idea, and then you maybe try it and you find, "Well, that didn't work quite so well, let's add another bolt here, or let's shave off a little and make the girder a little bit smaller here," that type of thing. And I think that's what we're doing. At the end of this, one of the products that I hope to see is a more realistic estimate for how much time is required for each of the topics we wanted to do. ... We'll just have to see how things go.

Related to one's disciplinary view is a teacher's background as a scholar. These teachers varied in the extent to which they saw their scholarly background influencing their course planning. On the one hand, regarding her graduate seminar Kathryn said:

> It's the first time I've taught a course that addresses my research interests as directly as this one does. And so I think it would be dishonest not to admit that that's really shaped what I think is important to be looking at. I think that we started out with a conception about what we wanted to do that was larger than the available literature.

For his graduate course in business management, Miguel said:

> Another process I went through -- I try to determine what it is that I could ... contribute to the course from my research and work experience background that would (1) make the course much easier to teach in the first go-around, (2) would also make [it] more meaningful, more relevant for today, and I think (3) would also provide me an opportunity to continue to do some research and background reading in topics of my interest.

At the other extreme, regarding her sophomore-level general studies humanities course, Diana commented:

> I would not want to bring my own personal scholarship into the classroom, unless it really fit the overall function of the course. It could easily become a distraction, I think, if I let it weigh too much.

And again illustrating how influences are confounded, Matthew remarked,

> My background as a scholar and my background as a teacher are virtually the same, in my opinion. It was hard for me to differentiate ... maybe that's my engineering mind coming

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> through -- I can't fine tune as much.

Most of these teachers also drew from the expert opinion of their disciplines, either indirectly --

> There's a tremendous amount of expert, wild difference of opinion about interdisciplinary humanities, and I have a tendency to find myself somewhere away from the two most virulent sides of the argument.

or directly--

> There is a pretty good body of opinion now -- a lot of people have written courses, syllabi, and textbooks for what should go into an introductory engineering course.

Similarly, some of the most important resources influencing teachers reflect the discipline; most important to these teachers were a rich, contemporary scholarly literature on the topic and the many other "good readings" necessary to supplement the texts for several courses.

> I must admit, I read a lot of texts and finally settled on one. And the way I've organized the course was influenced by the textbook, because I didn't want to make it too different.

The Educational Context

To uncover the teachers' beliefs about the purposes of education, we asked them to review and weight five alternative conceptions of curriculum taken from Eisner's work on curricular orientations (Eisner and Vallance, 1973; Eisner, 1985). The results, summarized in Illustration 3, show that by far these teachers emphasized cognitive development and student growth. Their discussions about educational purposes independently confirmed these emphases; they expressed broad purposes for students' intellectual development and personal or professional functioning. For example, Miguel described his hopes for students in the higher education graduate program in which his business management course was offered:

> I view the purpose [in] higher education as one that provides esoteric skills to individuals to be able to assume a position in the administration or policy or management of an organization of higher learning. ... People have to go just beyond theory ... It's the practical notion, practical aspects of the program. ... [In this graduate program] much of our course is focused on theory, and students may come out with having performed beautifully; that doesn't mean it'll do anything for them in the real world. So it's confronting reality, in my judgment.

Teachers' ideas about the purpose of the course, not unexpectedly, manifested these ideas about the purposes of education in complex explanations, as shown in Illustration 2. The teachers' explanations about course purposes were of three types. First, some spoke philosophically about their intentions in the course, for example in the women's history course:

> I think that we have a pretty clear idea, since the beginning, about the purpose of the course -- that we wanted to look at particular places and ways ... Issues of reproduction and sexuality and colonial processes ... I think we have a lofty purpose and constrained by our own limitations and the limitations of our scholarship.

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In contrast, another perspective on course purposes focused on specific department or program goals -- for example Andrea pointed out that a graduate course in a professional school should be:

> an integral part of the curriculum ... the purpose of this course has to be congruent with those... if the purpose isn't congruent, then it either isn't taught, or the purpose gets changed.

Other teachers conceived the course's purpose in terms of the importance to students of the course's subject matter:

> I reshaped it somewhat [from a similar course offered many years before] based on my views of what it should contain.... [for example] I have two of sixteen weeks dedicated to evaluation, which is never covered in business management, and in my judgement, that's one of the most essential management tools you can have...Those are by far the determining factors in my judgement that the course ought to cover -- MIS and costing and things of that sort. Things that I wasn't even that familiar with, but I had a strong sense that they were important.

When the teachers discussed their own background as a teacher, rather than mentioning specific experiences or events with classrooms or students, they concentrated on internal influences such as beliefs, policies, or the way they think about teaching. For example, Diana commented:

> My background as a teacher obviously has to be taken into consideration. I mean, I probably consider that more than I'm even aware of ... obviously I'm choosing to do some things because I've had success doing them...but I'm not just as aware of it.

Diana later offered a disarmingly succinct answer when asked for more illustrations of influences on her planning:

> Well, obviously, 20 years of experience of what is effective with the students -- what kinds of things I've learned are effective

Both Andrea and Miguel supplemented impressions from their teaching experience with feedback from students. For example, Miguel based his decision on the course's format on

> My past experience. This past semester, I asked as many students as I could "Give me feedback" on what worked for them. What students told me consistently worked the most for them ... was an opportunity to be aggressively involved in their own learning and to take an opportunity to present.

As their discussion of other influences illustrates, these teachers were all influenced by their conception of students' characteristics and needs. Curiously, while the teachers in the liberal arts fields gave higher ratings to student characteristics (Illustration 2) than did professional school faculty members, both groups volunteered eloquent explanations about the importance of students in their planning. Some, like Matthew, who coordinated an introductory course required for all freshman engineering students, emphasized the students' background:

> I sat down and thought, what can I actually do with second-semester freshmen? ... If I give them a design project, for instance, how much physics can I put into it, since most of them will not have had a physics course? Or most of the physics they will have had is what we

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> teach them in this course. So the answer is, not a lot. That pretty much dictates the kind of design projects you can have. So, yeah, student characteristics were fairly important in the planning.

Beginning students need not be freshmen; Miguel described the backgrounds of students in the graduate program as an important influence in the business management course:

> The fact that most of our students do not know that much about management -- requires that this be an introductory course. They're so diverse -- a majority of them don't have a business management or math/finance kind of background. Therefore I had to plan it to be an introductory survey course.

Matthew and Miguel illustrate a contrast especially important for first-time classes: while Matthew knew exactly who his students would be, and could describe their high school physics and mathematics backgrounds, Miguel did not yet know who his students would be and was drawing his impressions from previous contacts with the program's students in other, unrelated courses. The advantage in a tightly structured professional program is, of course, that the teacher can anticipate a certain student body, as Andrea illustrated:

> These are nurses; these are people who teach patients on a one-to-one basis every day, but don't necessarily teach groups of people, so I needed to look at the kinds of students [I would have].

Students also significantly influence the course's progress through the semester. Many of the teachers described ways that their courses had been changed from their original expectations because of student response. For example Andrea extended a major, initial topic in the course because she had overestimated the students' ability to grasp the topic and, realizing that it was a foundation for later work, adjusted not only the schedule but her expectations as well. Kathryn and Linda changed the procedure for ensuring broad discussion in their seminar after several weeks of only partial success with their first strategy, and also modified their overall course strategy after reading individual students' appers and meeting with the seminar participants.

Every class includes students potentially at risk. Most of these teachers had strategies in mind for dealing with students having difficulties:

> The ones I see as at risk are the first year students. You just don't know, in fact, how much background they have: how psychologically ready they are for this, how intellectually ready. I think the only thing you can do is give them as much out-of-class assistance as you can manage, starting with how you mark their papers and how you handle their remarks in class discussions, and then making sure that they meet with you from time to time and you can tell them how they're doing and the like. This is the first time I've ever team taught, so handling that -- with two people -- it sounds to me like it's going to be easier.

Students' program needs can also influence decisions about course content. Kathryn and Linda's graduate seminar served a particular constituency:

> Many of the students in this class are here to prepare for a graduate minor in comparative women's history, and so we had to be deliberately comparative in how we structure the

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> course. I was trying to model a way for them to think about drawing together a comparative reading list. They can't know everything about women [throughout the whole world], but rather you organize that field and round up literature that touches on certain conceptual issues.

For some teachers, student characteristics and needs were not only important in themselves but were confounded with other influences on their teaching. Andrea explained on behalf of many teachers that the influences on her planning process are "cyclic," because, for example

> what I think about education would direct how I think about student characteristics and how I think about how the course is set up and how I think about all those other things. So yes, I think [the purposes of education and student characteristics are] very important. In other words, once we get these two taken care of, then I have to get down to the nitty-gritty of "what is really education?" ... [And my] purpose in this course is to facilitate student learning.

The Organizational Context

Department policies and/or history influence course planning in extraordinarily diverse ways, depending on many factors. At the one extreme, Valerie explained that her course was quite frankly devised by the department to generate more student credit hours:

> This is designed to get in people who need science [laboratory] electives [to meet general studies distribution requirements]. ... They have to have a science elective. And all we need to do is design something that looks more attractive than Chem 101.

Program policies influenced another general studies course in another way. Diana's humanities course is part of committee-planned three-course sequence; she both honored the history of the humanities sequence and acknowledged her obligation to students:

> I feel very strongly about some of the program policies. The importance of not ever deviating from the syllabus so much that a student would be at a disadvantage in somebody else's class the next semester. I feel very strongly about the program history of making some judgments and exposing the students to the best that their heritage offers, but also exposing them to some of the misconceptions of their heritage as well. So I think that I can never let these [other influences] completely outweigh the fact that program policy and history have developed over 55 years with some very, very good results and so I do respect that highly.

At the other extreme, Matthew's introductory engineering course was designed to shift completely from the past:

> We decided early on [in planning the course] we were going to -- other than these curriculum guidelines -- junk history and start fresh.

In another form of contradiction with the past, the women's history course was designed to oppose department history:

> Not that I'm all that experienced in this department, but I think it's really important that we

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> offer these courses -- and that it'd be [the scholarly] literature and an experience ... [students say] "all these old, middle-aged white male scholars sit and talk. It doesn't teach me anything. They read the same thing that I did." So I think it's important that this course be real dynamic and the students really think they got something out of [it].

The context provided by department or program history and policy, then, can influence course planning in many different ways, particularly as mediated by institutional constraints or by the teacher's own interpretations. The second organizational context for course planning was the influence of college, program, or department (educational) goals. Two sorts of goals emerged as influences on course planning: curricular (or subject matter) goals, and goals aimed at students. These goals were explained by some teachers in terms of overt faculty policies and by others in terms of privately held beliefs about program goals.

Particularly in the professional schools, overall curricular goals were emphasized. For example, Andrea strongly asserted the primacy of program goals for her course:

> Absolutely. I mean, it has to be first. The course has to reflect department goals and the college program. I mean, that's a given. It has to, it has to. That's a given. ... Being an integral part of the curriculum, it meets the goals.

Matthew expressed program goals as an important guide:

> I'm operating within some specific college curriculum guidelines which were developed by a curriculum committee and there is a pretty good body of opinion ... for what should go into [this] introductory engineering course. ... I just took a lot of input. ... I found that a lot of my colleagues knew exactly how a freshman course should be organized and weren't at all shy about telling me about it!

In contrast to Matthew's overt response to college expectations, another course was planned to give students an antidote to established departmental curricular norms. These teachers' reaction against departmental curricular tradition expressed their closely-held, private view of their discipline:

> I think we're teaching against the tradition as much as we're teaching to it. ... Our department trains historians for the job market in 1966 -- for a particular kind of history -- and the labor market today is much more complex.

Program goals for students can rest on overtly stated program policies -- as in Andrea's nursing course -- or might emerge in the form of a teacher's beliefs about goals for the students in a program:

> What we would like to do is empower individuals [majoring in higher education, studying business management] in this course to be able to make a difference in higher education. ... How can I get the greatest number of my students to have the highest probability of making that impact? And that is to turn them on to -- acquaint them with and enhance their understanding of -- those techniques and tools that seem very valuable, timeless in value and application. I think that's why this is an extremely valuable course.

As several of the preceding quotes have illustrated, the institution's general education requirements form a third, and particularly important, organizational context for some courses. The introductory wildlife biology laboratory course and the sophomore-level humanities course both met general

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education distribution requirements and were designed to meet university-wide specifications for such courses. In contrast, the professional schools' introductory courses (one for freshmen, the other two for beginning doctoral students) were of course entirely unrelated to these requirements.

Other related courses outside the general education program -- another organizational context -- influenced course planning particularly as the teachers thought about whether the students' course of studies would be coherent -- and especially whether this course could enhance students' experiences with other topics:

> Yeah, some of it is specifically tied in. For instance, I specifically wanted to have a FORTRAN and PASCAL problem for them to solve early in the semester because I wanted to reinforce what they had learned the previous semester in 101. ... that's not a big part of the course, but it's there.

> The courses that seem to be the most valuable in this program are those that have practical meaning. ... The higher finance course -- which is something I try to mesh with -- is in my judgment the most valuable course in the program. I therefore try to emulate that course. And higher finance is a beautiful merger of theory with practice. And ... the fact that other courses [in this graduate program] are so theoretical, even enhances the value of this [business management course] even more.

Local expert opinion on what such courses should include was drawn from colleagues (in freshman engineering) or recent other courses (business management) or concurrent, coordinated courses (the wildlife biology laboratory's associated lecture course). Relating one course to another can be a complicated matter, particularly if the teacher is struggling to balance prescribed subject matter with private inclinations. Diana drew her criteria for decisions about course coordination from her dedication to the students:

> I've tried to direct my cutting [material from the original syllabus] as closely to the similar cutting that other people are doing, so that my students will have, as close as possible [roughly the same materials as the others]. Obviously you're not going to turn out cookie cutter students, but I would not ever cut something that all the faculty agree upon as being absolutely central, because then I think you're short-changing the students, because I think they have a right to have the basic substance of the course. [So ...] even when I've cut something, I will still talk about [for example] the Aristotelian material that I've cut, so they'll have the concept and understand why those things were a part of the course.

Similarly, local resources available to support teaching can influence teachers' decisions in course planning. Available resources were in general rated fairly low (Illustration 2) as influences, but resources were often mentioned. Local resources playing a role in course planning included a teaching laboratory, library, learning resource center, textbooks, available guest lecturers, computers, the team teachers, and proven problem assignments.

> The availability for speakers and outstanding material, I think confirmed my suspicion or decision or orientation to follow certain topics, to include them in the course. I might have decided perhaps not to include them, or maybe merge them with two or three others.

In summary, we found that teachers' influences on course planning may be grouped into three

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contexts: disciplinary, educational, and organizational. Our findings slightly altered and extensively amplified upon the general categories of influences proposed in the Stark, et al. work and in others' research on course planning.

Interpretations

We draw four sets of interpretations from the findings of this study. Two address questions we had originally intended to explore -- the influence of the discipline in course planning and the process of change -- and two emerged as the study progressed through data analysis -- the primacy of the organizational context for course planning, and the cyclic nature of the course planning process.

First, while the discipline is perhaps the central influence in course planning, it is not a separate influence, as Stark et al. also found (1988, p. 30), but rather is confounded with other influences and operates as a backdrop for them. That the academic discipline is influential is not news; what it is about one's discipline and how that essence interacts with other influences to shape course planning is the more important issue. We found that querying teachers directly about the influence of their "discipline" yielded few insights; upon reflection we concluded that the discipline -- and its manifestation in the course content -- is apparently so ingrained in the teacher's thinking that it could only with more pointed scrutiny have been revealed. The consequences for course content implied by the discipline are mediated by other factors -- the organizational context, logistical realities, and necessity of change.

Our second interpretation concerned the within-semester change process. Previous investigators' studies of course planning have treated planning as a static activity, an enterprise enacted before the course begins. We investigated the possibility of change within the semester, and found it substantial. Further, we found in-semester change influenced more by educational and organizational requirements than by disciplinary considerations. For example the initially tightly designed freshman engineering course was planned around student use of computers that did not arrive in time for the course; massive content and sequencing changes were required. Student feedback in the nursing education class and faculty committee decisions in the sophomore humanities course yielded changes in the syllabus, and coordination with the affiliated lecture course brought about changes in the wildlife biology laboratory.

Our third interpretation concerned the organizational context in which these varied courses were set: teachers were influenced strongly by, for example, curriculum committees' design of the courses, the courses' role in the university's General Education Program, or the field's required major sequence. While organizational influences on teaching have been discussed for the institutional level in the higher education literature (e.g. Peterson, 1988), Stark et al. were the first to mention organizational influences on classroom teaching, and our study has confirmed and expanded upon these influences. Indeed, the overriding theme for course planning itself seems to be the pre-eminence of the organizational context. A course is more than a discrete element in a catalog or part of a professor's "load." In addition to being positioned in a disciplinary context, the course exists also in an institutional context fraught with educational realities such as students' characteristics, and organizational realities as conceptual as departmental policies and goals or as concrete as resource availability. Teachers must merge these educational and institutional contextual forces with the disciplinary influences and translate the whole into a coherent course.

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Our last interpretation from these findings has been the cyclic nature of course planning, and the interweaving of the influences we have studied and discussed here. While each of these influences can be scrutinized separately, in reality the factors influencing teachers' planning form a complex web of interconnected forces -- some nested in others and some constrained by others. No neat structure for the influences on teachers' planning can be asserted; we find only that the discipline forms the substantive backdrop for course planning, and educational and organizational forces impinge upon the process from all sides. How these many forces interact and particularly how they modify substantive, disciplinary considerations, and which are open to modification, are all questions deserving focused attention.

Expansion Upon the NCRIPTAL Contextual Filters Model

At the outset, this study was designed to honor and amplify upon the work on course planning pioneered at NCRIPTAL by Stark and her colleagues. In this study, we sought to use the power of repeated, intensive interviewing to further investigate and, if possible, to expand upon the Conceptual Filters scheme for conceiving of course planning influences.

In brief, the Contextual Filters model of course planning influences offered by Stark and her colleagues at NCRIPTAL (1990, p. 139) contains five elements. Content and background considerations affecting course planning include the (1) influence of faculty background and characteristics, (2) faculty views of their academic fields, and (3) purposes of education espoused by faculty members. The influence of these three, interacting and taken together, upon (5) course decisions is mediated by (4) certain contextual filters, of which nine were studied.[2]

The NCRIPTAL researchers' discussions of this model raise important points about both course planning and the complexities of studying it. They report that most faculty believe that their scholarly training is (of the disciplinary influences available for selection) the most important influence upon their course planning. While our data confirmed that the discipline is foremost, for experienced teachers, it is likely that formal scholarly training -- the NCRIPTAL variable -- is less salient than is the teacher's overall conception of the discipline as developed and refined throughout the scholarly career. We found that the discipline is not so much a separate influence as it is a backdrop for all other influences and decisions, especially about selection of content for the course.

The NCRIPTAL study found effective thinking and concept learning to be the most important purposes of education espoused by their faculty respondents. In contrast, we found two purposes vastly (Illustration 3) preferred over others -- and only one of these could be said to parallel NCRIPTAL's effective thinking/concept learning purpose. The other purpose heavily preferred by our teachers was "providing students with opportunities and resources so that growth can occur in students through their own choices in the areas relevant to them." The fact that we found this substantial difference could be a function of our sampling (for example the small number of teachers, or the fact that we studied courses at all levels) or could indicate a real difference between our

[2]This model approximates the model quite independently developed by Dinham (1989), who studied course planning and decision making by studio teachers in architecture.

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findings and theirs.

The NCRIPTAL study found a different relationship than we did among course content, student characteristics, and organizational considerations. They found that disciplinary influences mediated through purposes of education and filtered through the nine contexts (including student characteristics and -- less importantly -- program/college goals) yielded subject matter selection and arrangement. We found that the discipline influenced the selection of subject matter, and educational and organizational contexts operated strongly to modify subject matter selection as well as strongly influencing subject matter arrangement, including design of academic tasks. These discoveries emerged in the teachers' discussions of their actual planning processes; while their initial reports on how they perceived their planning were fairly straightforward, their actual reports through the process itself demonstrated how complex, cyclic, and recursive the process actually can be.

These differences respond to the NCRIPTAL report's observation (p. 138) that "we know less about the course decisions faculty make than about their perceptions of influences" (italics ours). Our interview study, examining teachers' reports of actual decisions, demonstrates that perceptions may not equate decisions in actual course planning. In their course planning, teachers -- in whom their discipline is ingrained and for whom the discipline inexorably influences content decisions -- respond even more than perhaps they are aware to the obvious educational and less obvious but possibly even more salient organizational contexts in which they teach.

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